

#14 WHO CAN STAND? (REV 6:12-8:5)

The Lamb is opening the seals of the scroll — unfolding God’s purposes for history and bringing a resolution to the wickedness of mankind and the suffering of God’s people. But how long must the righteous wait for their blood to be avenged? And how will they be impacted by God’s judgments?

The Day of Wrath — Who Can Stand? (6:12-17). John sees the undoing of all creation. Creation is organized into three parts: the luminaries, the heavens (sky), and the earth. Peter organizes judgment similarly: “*the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*” (2 Pet. 3:10)

John describes what appears to be one glimpse into the final day of God’s and the Lamb’s wrath using the language of numerous judgment texts from the OT. Language from oracles against Babylon (Isa. 13:9-13), Edom (Isa. 34:1-5), Egypt (Ezek. 32:6-8), and Judah (Joel 2:10, 30-31) are all weaved together into one cohesive vision of the day of wrath.

Because this language is previously used in the prophets alongside national judgments in the midst of history, some do not see the sixth seal as representative of the *final* day of wrath. However, 2 Peter 3:2 is instructive here. As he begins to urge his readers to live in light of the coming judgment and restoration, he urges them to “*remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.*” Peter read even the prophets as predicting the final day of the Lord. If every prophetic passage envisioning cosmic destruction and renewal *that also* speaks of localized destruction and renewal in the midst of history were to be removed, the prophets would have nothing to say about the final day of the Lord.⁸⁷ This does not mean the sixth seal *must* be a picture of final judgment, but given this vision’s lack of a local object and its similarities to the final day in Revelation 20:11, final judgment is likely preferred.

Regardless, every judgment and salvation in the midst of history is a downpayment on the the end (2 Pet. 2:4-10) and relevantly impacts our thinking and living now (2 Tim. 3:16). Like much of John’s vision, this vision works less through rational logic and more through our imaginations (i.e., if the mountains are all gone, how is everyone hiding in the mountains?). Taking time to imagine the destruction of all creation as described here does us good. So much of what we take for granted, rely on, and busy ourselves with day to day will be undone. Everything we do now is not at all meaningless (1 Cor. 15:58); but this vision of darkness, destruction, and emptiness does shed light to help us see what has permanent substance and value.

It also does us good to see a vision of how everyone, great and small, will respond to this day. Playing on Isaiah 2:19-21, John depicts the absolute terror of all, slave and free, at the face of the one on the throne and from the Lamb. This is instructive in light of the many today who mock that God should show himself. They do not recognize what would happen if he did.

Why is judgment coming upon everyone (kings, generals, slave, free, etc.)? As with many images in Revelation, later oracles are revealing. This same list of people are listed in the midst of the judgment upon the beast (in which birds gather to feast on their corpses — 19:18-19). All are judged because all have worshipped the beast.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ See lesson 4 for a longer discussion of this.

⁸⁸ Beale, 139.

Given that Revelation works more on our imagination than on our logic, how all is this imaginative depiction of “the great day of their wrath” intended to impact John’s readers and us today?

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God’s Servants Will Stand (7). A number of interludes in Revelation will step back from the consistent progression of judgments to reflect in some way on God’s plan and purposes. In terror, the question is posed at the end of the 6th seal, “*The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?*” Chapter 7 pauses the action to reflect on this question and on the identity of God’s people.

When God previously sent executioners to slay evildoers in Jerusalem in Ezekiel 9, those who sighed and groaned over the land’s abominations were marked on the head and exempted from execution. Here, the people of God are sealed on the forehead before any winds [of judgment] blow on the earth. The seal identifies who belongs to God and thus who will be protected from judgment (9:4; etc.). This is also comparable to the blood on the Israelite’s doorposts which protected them from the angel of death who came against Egypt (Exod. 12:7, 13, 22-28).⁸⁹ The earth beast will imitate this — marking people on the hand and forehead so they can survive and thrive in the beast’s kingdom (13:16-17).

As with the Lion-Lamb of chapter 5, there is again dissonance with what John hears and sees. He *hears* of 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel. Twelve thousand are counted out from each tribe. But this is no ordinary listing of the twelve tribes. Judah leads the list, Dan is missing (Gen. 49:17-18? 1 Kings 12:28-30?), and, depending on how you read it, Manasseh or Joseph is added (Manasseh and Ephraim were the sons of Joseph). This counting is likely intended to appear similar to a military census (Numbers 1).⁹⁰

Though John *hears* a military census of 144,000 Israelites sealed and protected on the earth (7:4-8), he turns and sees an innumerable multitude from every nation praising God before the heavenly throne. They are coming out of the great tribulation.⁹¹ Setting what John sees and hears side-by-side, a new image is formed that is quite instructive.

- John hears 144,000 are sealed before the earth and sea are harmed as a measure of protection, but the result is seen in how they have come out of tribulation [on earth] and are now around the heavenly throne. They are preserved through harm, not from harm.
- John hears of 144,000 from Israel to denote an organized picture of the true Israel, but what John sees reveals that the true Israel consists of those from every nation, tribe, people, and language who have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.
- John appears to hear a military census from every tribe in Israel, but what he sees is a multinational multitude of those who have died in tribulation (martyrs).

⁸⁹ Beale, 144.

⁹⁰ BibleProject, *Overview: Revelation 1-11*, <<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/revelation-1-11/>>

⁹¹ Tribulation continues between Jesus’ first and second comings. For more, see Scott Kercheville, *Living Between the Advents (Luke 7:18-23)*, <<http://www.alstonroadchurch.org/media2/sermons/2020/12/20/living-between-the-advents-luke-718-23-24>>

Side-by-side, this shows us who really belongs to God. Side-by-side, this may even hint at part of how God will solve the problems of evil and bring his purposes. He sends out an army of people who will witness to the truth until death. God uses kingdoms and armies in his judgments, but the people of God are sent out as an army with God's word as their sword (Eph. 6:17; 2 Cor. 10:3-6).

How all are these two images — what John hears and sees — intended to inform, encourage, and motivate Revelation's readers?

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Prayer answered — the seventh seal (8:1-5). God's servants have been clearly marked and thus protected. In heaven, all have been praising God for what he has done, is doing, and will do. The saints have been imploring God to avenge their blood — how long, O Sovereign Lord? When the sixth seal was open, earth was filled with screams of terror. But when the Lamb opens 7th seal, we see a perspective from heaven: total silence for half an hour. The silence is filled with reverence, awe, and anticipation over what is about to happen. The Day of the Lord which ends all other days of the Lord is here (Zeph. 1:7). All prayers will be answered. All praise will be validated.

In the earthly temple, coals from the altar of burnt offering were normally placed on a golden censer and brought into the holy place so incense could be burned on the altar of incense when the morning and evening prayers were offered (Ex. 30:7-8; Ps. 141:2; Lk. 1:10). A similar scene takes place here in the heavenly temple. An angel offers incense to God with the prayers of the saints. It is a rich image. The prayers of the saints are a refreshing, sweet smell to God.

The prayers of the saints are now answered. The angel fills his censer with fire and throws it upon the earth (cf. Ezek. 10:2). Thunder, rumblings, lightning, and an earthquake results. Such activity is comparable to what happened when God descended in smoke and fire upon Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16-19; cf. Ps. 77:18; Isa. 29:6). Bauckham has observed that this sequence of activity — thunder, rumblings, lightning — is first seen coming from God's throne (4:5), but intensifies throughout the book.⁹² An earthquake is added with the 7th seal; heavy hail is added with the 7th trumpet; with the 7th bowl, the earthquake and the hail are intensified while islands and mountains flee. Beale explains that "each recapitulated portrayal of the judgment fills out in more detail how it [final judgment] will occur."⁹³

How all is this vision of judgment mingled with incense and the prayers of the saints intended to impact the imagination and lives of Revelation's readers? What impacts you from this scene?

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⁹² Richard Bauckham, "The Eschatological Earthquake in the Apocalypse of John," *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977), 228. Referenced in Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 166.

⁹³ Beale, 167. "Therefore, after the introductory note of 4:5 announcing the expectation of the final judgment, each of the remaining phrases is a formal notation that the last judgment has been narrated but not exhaustively so.